

“LITERATURE OF THE SOUL” OF DANTE IN THE CREMATION (HUOZANG) BY LAO SHE

“LITERATURA DA ALMA” DE DANTE EM CREMAÇÃO
(HUOZANG) DE LAO SHE

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Abstract

Taking Lao She's notion of the “literature of the soul” as its point of departure, this article reads Lao She's *Cremation* in relation to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, arguing that its artistic “failure” should be understood not only as the result of both technical and stylistic limitations, but also as a consequence of the urgency with which Lao She wrote in support of the War of Resistance against Japan. If *Cat Country* takes Dante as an explicit formal model, *Cremation* internalizes Dante's condemnation of neutrality as formulated in *Inferno* III. The novel's structural imbalances constitute the formal manifestations of this ethical choice. Lao She thus transforms the act of writing into a deliberate stance: authorship itself becomes a form of participation in the resistance; writing becomes an act of historical choice through which Lao She accepts the risk of formal failure in order to reject neutrality. In this sense, *Cremation* constitutes an instance of the “literature of the soul” not only by functioning as a call for moral awakening, but also by existing as a work in which formal insufficiency is not merely an aesthetic failure, but rather manifests the author's conscious decision to assume ethical responsibility through literature.

Keywords: Dante; *Divine Comedy*; Lao She; *Cremation*; Literature of the Soul.

Resumo

Tomando como ponto de partida a noção de “literatura da alma” de Lao She, este artigo analisa *Cremação*, de Lao She, em relação à *Divina Comédia* de Dante, argumentando que seu “fracasso” artístico deve ser compreendido não apenas como resultado de limitações técnicas e estilísticas, mas também como consequência da urgência com que Lao She escreveu em apoio à Guerra de Resistência contra o Japão. Se *A Cidade dos Gatos* toma Dante como um modelo formal explícito, *Cremação* internaliza a condenação de Dante à neutralidade, conforme formulada no Canto III do *Inferno*, de modo que

Riassunto

Prendendo come punto di partenza la nozione di “letteratura dell'anima” di Lao She, il saggio legge *Cremação* di Lao She in relazione alla *Commedia* dantesca, sostenendo che il suo “fallimento” artistico debba essere compreso non soltanto come risultato di limiti tecnici e stilistici, ma anche come conseguenza dell'urgenza con cui Lao She scrisse a sostegno della guerra di resistenza contro il Giappone. Se *Città di gatti* assume Dante come modello formale esplicito, *Cremação* interiorizza la condanna dantesca della neutralità formulata nell'*Inferno* III. Gli squilibri strutturali del romanzo costituiscono le

os desequilíbrios estruturais do romance constituem as manifestações formais dessa escolha ética. Lao She transforma, assim, o ato de escrever em uma postura deliberada: a própria autoria torna-se uma forma de participação na resistência, e a escrita torna-se um ato de escolha histórica através do qual o autor aceita o risco do fracasso formal para rejeitar a neutralidade, fazendo com que, nesse sentido, *Cremação* constitua um exemplo da “literatura da alma” não apenas por funcionar como um apelo ao despertar moral, mas também por existir como uma obra na qual a insuficiência formal não constitui um mero fracasso estético, mas sim manifesta a decisão consciente do autor de assumir a responsabilidade ética por meio da literatura.

Palavras-chave: Dante; *Divina Comédia*; Lao She; *Cremação*; literatura da alma.

manifestazioni formali di tale scelta etica. Lao She trasforma così l’atto della scrittura in una presa di posizione deliberata: l’autorialità stessa diventa forma di partecipazione alla resistenza. La scrittura diventa atto di scelta storica attraverso cui Lao She accetta il rischio del fallimento formale per rifiutare la neutralità. In tal senso, *Cremazione* costituisce un esempio di “letteratura dell’anima” non soltanto come appello al risveglio morale, ma come opera in cui l’insufficienza formale non costituisce un mero fallimento estetico, bensì manifesta la decisione consapevole dell’autore di assumersi la responsabilità etica attraverso la letteratura.

Parole chiave: Dante; *Commedia*; Lao She; *Cremazione*; letteratura dell’anima.

In his reflection on the “literature of the soul,” Lao She¹ identifies Dante as the first author capable of radically broadening the horizon of literary representation, including alongside earthly life also the dimension of the soul, understood as a space for moral judgment and ethical orientation.² As he observes, the *Divine Comedy* does not limit itself to merely narrating human actions, but constructs a spiritual topography in which the human being is confronted with both what he ought to fear and what he must hope for. In this sense, speaking of the soul does not mean adhering to any particular religious doctrine—just consider the fact that Lao She explicitly introduces the concept of Dante’s “literature of the soul” for the first time in a speech

1 Lao She (1899-1966) is widely recognized as one of the most influential figures in modern Chinese literature, celebrated for his significant contributions as a novelist and dramatist, and most notably for being honored as a “People’s Artist” for his profound social engagement. His creative style is characterized by a pioneering use of the Beijing dialect, a vivid portrayal of the “little people” or urban poor, and a masterful synthesis of biting humor with profound tragedy which effectively captured the socio-political complexities of early 20th-century China. His literary legacy is secured by seminal works such as the novel *Rickshaw Boy* (also known as *Camel Xiangzi*) which achieved international acclaim, the epic family saga *Four Generations Under One Roof*, and the masterpiece of modern Chinese theater, *Teahouse*.

2 See, Lao She, 2008d, p. 285-290. On the same topic see also Liu, 2020, p. 1-12; Liu, 2014, p. 5-23; Fusini, 2013; Xu, 2012, p. 54-55. On Dante’s influence on the political thought of Chinese intellectuals of the period and on Chinese literature in general, see Wen, 2018; Chen, 2021, p. 653-686.

addressed to Buddhist monks, linking it directly to Buddhism—but rather restoring to literature a normative and orienting function that “touches the soul” (2008d, p. 287).³

In the context of Lao She’s authorial career as a whole, *Cat Country* occupies an inaugural and paradigmatic position for his formulation of a Dantean-inspired “literature of the soul.”⁴ Published in 1933, this novel was explicitly conceived under the influence of the *Divine Comedy*: as the author himself states, *Cat Country* is a journey into Dante’s *Inferno* which limits itself to “recounting what is seen” (2008c, p. 189). Through the fantastical framework of a Chinese pilot’s journey to Mars, and his discovery of a society of cat-people, Lao She constructs a ferocious allegory of 1930s China, portrayed as a civilization in an advanced state of moral, political, and cultural decadence. Laziness, corruption, selfishness, the systematic inversion of values, and the inability to distinguish good from evil transform the titular Cat Country into a veritable terrestrial hell, doomed to destruction not so much because of the violence of foreign invaders as because of the cowardice and inertia of its own elites and its people. In this sense, *Cat Country* creates a “literature of the soul” directed towards a society as a whole: the *Inferno* is staged in order to judge society, admonish readers, and awaken the collective conscience through satire, allegory, and caricature.

If *Cat Country* can be read as Lao She’s first attempt to use the “literature of the soul”—which would later mature in the novel *Four Generations Under One Roof*⁵—in order to allegorically expose the moral and spiritual degradation of contemporary society, the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan in 1937 quickly rendered such a critical stance (based primarily on external observation and denunciation) inadequate. From this historical moment onward, the question of the “soul” transforms, for the writer, into a problem that directly concerns the role of the intellectual in this significant historical moment.

In articles written between 1937 and the early 1940s, Lao She clearly elaborates a principle that marks a decisive turning point in his poetics: great literature cannot exist without the author having “great [moral] personality,”

3 All translations from Chinese and Italian are my own unless otherwise indicated.

4 The phrase “literature of the soul” is Lao She’s own critical category, formulated through his reading of Dante rather than a term used by Dante himself. For Lao She, Dante’s work demonstrated how literature could serve as a moral instrument to admonish the public and regulate human behavior—a function he found lacking in Chinese literature. By advocating for this spiritual vision, Lao She hoped to “open the door to virtue” and purify the national heart, fostering harmony and guiding a fragmented society toward ethical and spiritual rebirth. On the theme of Dante in *Cat Country*, see You, 2025, p. 357-366.

5 See, for example, Tian, 2022, p. 7-9; Li, 1989, p. 152-153; and Shen, 2009, p. 87-91.

nor without his having a real involvement in collective suffering.⁶ As he states in *The Great Time and the Writer* (1937), “in great literary works there is necessarily a great heart and a great personality,” and such greatness is born only from a “deep sympathy” for society, which the writer can acquire exclusively through personal sacrifice and active participation in the life of his time (2008e, p. 111). Writing while remaining “closed in a room,” relying on a purely “internal warmth,” means producing a fragile literature, destined to dissolve at the first hint of any exposure to historical reality (2008e, p. 111).

In this same text, Lao She identifies “experience” as the true foundation of writing, inviting writers to “put themselves in the fire of the great age” and even “into the inferno,” so that their words do not become a mere stylistic exercise devoid of moral force. It is not accidental that, in this context, he explicitly recalls Dante, pointing to the *Divine Comedy* as the supreme example of a work that bears the imprint of the author’s own personality and historical responsibility throughout: a text that, while traversing Inferno and Paradise, remains profoundly rooted in the problems of its own time (2008e, p. 111-112).

This conception is reaffirmed and radicalized in later writings, such as *Artists Must Go to the Front Lines Too* (1940), where Lao She states that “there are no great writers with a dead heart,” and that every great work of art is, inevitably, an expression of the spirit of a great age and of a concrete moral struggle. The *Divine Comedy* itself, Lao She observes, is not a coldly contemplative work, but a text that judges, condemns and admonishes, without hesitation, the individuals and institutions of its own age (2008g, p. 244).

It is in light of this reflection, matured in the midst of his own experience of wartime China, that we can understand the ten years that separate *Cat Country* and *Cremation*. First of all, Lao She felt the need to dedicate himself to the “literature of Resistance.” In fact, on January 1, 1941, he published a poem in which he described his motto for the new year: “everything I can do—such as propaganda in support of the War of Resistance, literary creation, a life lived with seriousness and poverty, sincere loyalty to friends—yes, everything in my power, I must do” (2008h, p. 560). On December 15, 1942, in an article entitled *Declaration of Intent*, he said, “since the beginning of the War of Resistance on July 7, I have written practically nothing that was not related to the War of Resistance,” and “I have always hoped that my writings could have at least a minimal effect in the propaganda of the War of Resistance” (2008h, p. 571). At this very juncture, he turns to the artistic

6 Cf., for example, Tang, 1993, p. 256-257 and Prado-Fonts, 2014, p. 177-215.

work he views as most sublime, the *Divine Comedy*, for help in a review entitled *Divine Comedy*, published on April 27, 1942. In this review, Lao She states: “among the great literary masterpieces I have read, the one that has given me the most is Dante’s *Divine Comedy*,” and adds: “in the world there exists only one great, absolutely inimitable book: the *Divine Comedy*” (2008h, p. 567-568).

If in *Cat Country*, Dante’s *Inferno* still served as an allegorical space in which to denounce the decadence of others and reawaken the collective soul, now Dante’s lesson is internalized in the soul of the author: *Cremation* thus arises as a response to the ethical demands of the Resistance, as a form of “literature of the soul” that, in times of war, no longer merely judges the world, hoping to give impetus to the people, but also subjects the conscience of the writer to judgment. Here, the relevant Dantean lesson is the ethical contrast between choosing and refusing to choose, articulated with particular force in *Inferno* III and examined more fully below.

Cremation is the only full-length novel Lao She completed during the War of Resistance, as well as the only work in which he attempted to directly address the theme of war. The story takes place primarily in occupied Wencheng, an imaginary town in Hebei Province, northern China. The plot revolves around the nighttime operations of a guerrilla unit tasked with infiltrating the town to prepare a sabotage operation, as well as the intertwined destinies of the local inhabitants under enemy occupation. The novel highlights how hesitation, opportunism, and fear ultimately produce destructive consequences, both at the individual and collective levels (2008a, p. 328).

At the beginning of the novel, a group of thirty-two guerrilla fighters awaits an opportunity to enter the town. Two figures immediately emerge as central: Shi Lei, the group’s leader, a peasant with extensive military experience, and Ding Yishan, his deputy, a young urban intellectual newly involved in the armed struggle. The contrast between the two, based on their different social origins and dispositions, suggests from the outset a latent tension between idealism and pragmatism. However, this narrative thread is abruptly interrupted—almost before the narrative begins—when Ding Yishan is killed during a preliminary mission in the town.

After Ding Yishan’s death, the narrative focuses on Shi Lei and the continuation of the guerrilla operation. Taking the place of the young intellectual is Menglian, his fiancée, who decides to collaborate with the guerrillas. Alongside her, other characters from Wencheng appear in the novel: Menglian’s father, Wang Juren, a respected figure in the town who,

to protect his property, ends up collaborating with the Japanese; and Ding Yishan's assassins, Liu Ergou and Tian Mazi (the former a collaborator and the latter an opportunist). More generally, the citizenry appears hesitant to resist the occupation, so the novel depicts a social environment marked by moral ambiguity, where personal survival often trumps any form of collective responsibility.

The narrative tension culminates in the sabotage operation and its preparations immediately beforehand. When the guerrillas receive the order to retreat, they are discovered by the Japanese army and forced into a battle in which they are outnumbered. In the final clash, guerrillas, enemy soldiers, and civilians caught up in the chaos of war die together, rendering the victims and executioners indistinguishable:

Many people lay in the street, unable to move: some were already dead, others screaming in pain. Among our soldiers and the civilian population were also enemy soldiers, heads pressed together or hands touching, lying in the same place, so much so that it was no longer possible to distinguish who was victorious from who was vanquished. The aggressive ambition of the invasion and the fury of revenge caused everyone's blood to flow together, staining the streets red (Lao She, 2008b, p. 493-494).

After managing to escape the town, Shi Lei finally chooses to kill himself, setting fire to the place where he had hidden, in an extreme gesture that concludes the novel.

In one sense, the "literature of the soul" is configured in this novel as above all a "literature of Resistance" whose fundamental task is to awaken the conscience and push individuals to action. In *Cremation*, Lao She constructs this level of interpretation through an insistent and deliberately brutal representation of violence, aimed at unmasking the intrinsically unjust and inhumane nature of Japanese aggression. The narrative progression traces the path of a significant escalation: the occupation of Wencheng begins with the systematic destruction of domestic animals—"the enemy's first 'purification' targeted chickens, ducks, oxen, and sheep"—leaving room for the tragically naive illusion that the enemy might stop there, sparing "those precious lives that can be lived and died only once" (2008b, p. 399). This hope, however, is quickly shattered by increasingly organized violence, taking the form of widespread looting and total control over the townspeople: Japanese soldiers search every space, "from the trunk to the chamber pots in the toilet," even tearing the clothes of young and old women and searching children's pockets, taking away everything that can be carried and destroying what cannot (2008b, p. 399).

This economic and symbolic violence is accompanied by extreme physical violence, described in a vocabulary that emphasizes the sheer variety of torture techniques employed: decapitations, flayings, prolonged torments, to the point of transforming human suffering into a sadistic spectacle from which the executioners derive “pleasure and glory” (Lao She, 2008b, p. 401). In this sense, the representation of violence has not a merely mimetic function, but a pedagogical one: through horror, the text forces the reader to recognize the radical incompatibility of human life and the invader’s domination.

It is against this backdrop that the central link between the violence suffered by the people and the awakening of the collective soul emerges. When the inhabitants of Wencheng begin to fight back—poisoning wells, setting fire to trains loaded with weapons, attacking the enemy with rudimentary means—their material existence becomes increasingly precarious, but “in their hearts they feel a slight sense of relief,” because they have learned to hate and to transform hatred into action (Lao She, 2008b, p. 399). The novel insists that even children understand that “only sacrifice can generate hope” and that sacrifice, precisely because it is sacrifice, cannot be calculated in terms of gain or loss (2008b, p. 402).

Wang Juren fits into this framework as a prime example of how accommodation and cowardice paradoxically lead to self-destruction. In an attempt to “not offend anyone” and to safeguard his property, family, and status, he agrees to collaborate with the enemy, passively becoming a puppet of the occupying power. Meanwhile, he financially supports the Chinese army on the advice of Lao Zheng, his tenant farmer, who immediately devoted himself to the Resistance. Wang Juren’s compromise strategy—“he thought that the enemy would simply have to exploit his prestige, without coming to disturb him, and that he could then sit at home, calmly rereading the book *Dong Lai Bo Yi*, smoking a few yellow tobacco pipes, to spend his old age in peace and safeguard his life, family, and property”—failed on both fronts: he was unable to deceive the invaders or escape the judgment of the community (Lao She, 2008b, p. 405). The collapse of his attempted neutrality can thus be read as an implicit echo of Dante’s condemnation of those who refuse to choose.

Alongside these figures of moral decay, Lao She introduces more admirable characters. For example, Captain Tang sacrifices himself during the losing battle that leads to the Japanese occupation of the town, a character who “had not slept a wink for two whole days and nights” and “was so exhausted that he could have fallen asleep standing up, yet a smile continued to appear on his face. When advancing, he was always the first; when retreating, he remained the last.” His “smile made the soldiers forget everything, who thought only of shooting at the enemy” (2008b, p. 373).

Lao Zheng, Wang Juren's tenant farmer, is described with concrete and vital traits which embody the opposite response: the daily courage, imperfect but determined, of those who choose to resist. For example, he "went to cut wood for the Chinese soldiers and to bring them water. They gave him money, but he swore to heaven—so much so that his neck became red from the effort—that if he reached out to take that money, the following year he would let the locusts devour all his crops" (2008b, p. 382).

Thus, on the first level of interpretation, the "literature of the soul" defines itself as a literature that does not aim at contemplation, but at taking a stand: it shows that the horrors of war cannot be avoided and that the only alternative to moral degradation is the choice, even if painful, of resistance.

The problem of choice moreover concerns not just the world represented in the novel, but also the act of writing itself, for the demand to take a stand concerns not only the novel's characters but also its author. Lao She, however, was dissatisfied with *Cremation* as an artistic object. Indeed, Lao She admits that the novel is a literary failure due to his own incompetence: "the novel sets out to describe the war, telling people how cowardice and malingering during a war will result in nothing but self-destruction. This premise, however, cannot compensate for its failure, a failure not because it deals with the war ... but because I knew too little about the war" (1981, p. 86).

Overall, the novel displays a series of artistic weaknesses stemming from the unresolved structural tension between ethical intention and narrative realization. It oscillates between the desire to represent war as a total moral experience and the inability to embody that experience in characters with real psychological depth. This fracture emerges with particular clarity in the depiction of the different characters and in the way in which the narrative action is forcibly set in motion.

The most obvious case is that of the female protagonist Menglian. The character appears from the beginning as a figure overburdened with symbolic and narrative functions, to the point that her identity seems composed of heterogeneous fragments that are difficult to reconcile. Described as "spoiled" yet "benevolent" (Lao She, 2008b, p. 387-388), she is depicted as intelligent but undisciplined, rebellious yet fragile, and eager for independence while remaining a prisoner of her own sensitivity (2008b, p. 390). This accumulation of traits produces a leveling effect rather than complexity; Menglian reacts mechanically to external stimuli. The text declares her transformation—stating her thoughts were "tempered by the war" (2008b, p. 429)—but fails to construct it. As Wang (1989, p. 213) observes, her metamorphosis into a patriot borders on fantasy, revealing a character shaped by formulas rather than lived experience.

One additional weakness in the novel is an evident imbalance in the narrative mechanism. The novel's action is progressively concentrated in the hands of a single character, Tian Mazi, who (having appeared only halfway through the narrative) suddenly bursts into the story and becomes the sole driving force behind all the decisive turning points. It is he who kills Ding Yishan, eliminates Liu Ergou, denounces Wang Juren leading to his arrest by the Japanese, and finally makes the guerrilla squad's desperate action inevitable. Moreover, against all narrative logic, he appears only at these moments. By entrusting collective responsibilities to this purely functional figure, the novel reduces complex moral conflicts to an artificial chain of causality. Lacking a substantial depiction of the Japanese enemy (Yin, 1980, p. 53), evil is delegated to the clownish Tian Mazi, who acts as a "mask" rather than a character. Consequently, the war loses its historical dimension, dissolving into a series of mere plot twists.

The result is a novel permeated by an intense emotional charge, but incapable of truly realizing this emotion in a stable narrative form. The representation of these emotions is violent, agitated, often emphatic, but remains superficial. Lao She himself described this difficulty with an extremely effective metaphor: "a little of my feelings is like a drop of oil floating on water, swaying here and there, but never truly penetrating it" (2008a, p. 328). This image seems to perfectly describe *Cremation*: the emotion is present, but it does not settle; it perturbs the surface of the text without transforming it from within.

The novel's artistic failure, then, does not consist simply in technical errors of narrative form or poorly executed characters. It is the product of a deeper contradiction: Lao She attempts to push his writing beyond the limits he himself recognizes, sacrificing formal and psychological coherence in the name of moral urgency. But it is precisely this failure, once consciously accepted, that opens the way to a further reading: that of a text that accepts its own inadequacy as the necessary price for not shirking the duty of narrating the war. *Cremation* is not only an artistically problematic novel, but a text in which a crisis of form becomes the visible sign of a radical ethical choice.

Lao She "writes to 'meet' his failure, as if only through failure could he convince both himself and his readers of his unconditional patriotic heroism" (Wang, 1989, p. 212). As Wang suggests, *Cremation* stages an extreme gesture by the author, who transforms the act of writing into a form of symbolic martyrdom.

This choice resonates strongly with the theoretical reflections Lao She developed during the war years. Writing is, for Lao She, not an activity separate from historical action, but a form of participation that demands total

personal involvement and brings the writer's entire existence into play. On the one hand, as he emphasizes in the article *Defending Wuhan and Literary Work*, published on July 9, 1938, "works completed over a lifetime, such as the *Divine Comedy* or *Faust*, are not what we can expect at this moment. We can only count on sudden explosions of inner sparks; we have neither the time nor the conditions to pile up wood and calmly light a pyre that rises as high as a signal flame" (2008f, p. 141). On the other hand, under the logic that governs the novel as a form as well as the activity of writing in itself, the true sin is not failure, but rather the refusal to choose.

From this perspective, the aesthetic failure of *Cremation* becomes secondary to its moral necessity. As Wang observes, Lao She ends up becoming "a tragic hero on the literary scene," though not in the Dantean sense of a literal coincidence between author and character (1989, p. 212). Dante in the *Divine Comedy* is simultaneously the author and traveler of the poem; Lao She, through the extreme gesture of voluntary self-destruction, ends up overlapping with Shi Lei, not by identity, but through a kind of ethical convergence. The textual suicide within the fictional narrative is the one culminating in the voluntary death of the hero Shi Lei; the metatextual "suicide" is that of Lao She as writer.

Although some scholars attribute to this suicide a Confucian moral value, Shi Lei's suicide does not respond to a structural necessity of the narrative.⁷ On the level of narrative it even appears excessive, as if the story could have concluded a moment earlier without losing coherence. Precisely for this reason, its function must be sought elsewhere. The final death is described in terms of fulfillment, not heroic emphasis. Shi Lei "waits to be reduced to ashes; he feels no restlessness, he feels life flowing out of his body like blood. The smoke slowly invades the hut, blinding him; he suffocates, but remains serene, because he has now fulfilled his duty as a soldier" (Lao She, 2008b, p. 500). The calm that accompanies self-destruction indicates that it is not a strategic choice, but rather the exhaustion of a mission.

It is precisely here that Lao She's dialogue with Dante manifests itself, implicitly yet profoundly. In *Cremation*, unlike *Cat Country*, there is no explicit reference to the *Divine Comedy* nor a declared desire to construct a "Dantean allegory." As Lao She himself states in *How I Wrote 'The Divorce,' Cat Country* was consciously conceived on the model of Dante's *Inferno* (2008c, p. 189). *Cremation*, on the other hand, seems to be on a different plane, more opaque and less explicitly programmatic. However, it is precisely this absence of explicit declarations that makes the connection with Dante more radical: it is no longer a question of formal imitation or allegorical

7 For example, Sheng, 2017, p. 136.

transposition, but of an ethical assumption of one of the deepest nuclei of the *Divine Comedy*, that is, its condemnation of the failure to make a choice.

Lao She himself provides the theoretical key to this connection with Dante when he states that literature, as a “living thing,” must “break old shells” and that the only true instrument for creating a work that shatters limits is experience. He concludes explicitly: “as in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, whether one ascends to Paradise or descends to the Inferno, the author’s shadow and personality are always present” (2008e, p. 111-112).

In this sense, *Cremation* implements a strategy similar to but not identical with Dante’s: one of the most decisive innovations of Dante’s poem consists in having the protagonist of the story coincide with the author himself, understood as a historical subject speaking in the first person. The “character who says I” is therefore not a fictitious figure but a narrative projection of the author, whose presence is constructed through a dense network of autobiographical references. This dimension of historicity does not have a merely individual significance, but rather tends toward a form of symbolic completeness approaching the biblical, in which the author’s personal experience takes on an exemplary and universal meaning (Inglese, 2018, p. 104). Lao She performs a similar gesture on a symbolic level: he does not personally enter the scene, but ensures that the destruction of his character coincides with the very act of writing. Shi Lei’s suicide thus becomes the place in which the author “puts himself into the inferno” through writing, taking upon himself the risk of failure, excess, and formal ruin (2008e, p. 111).

Shi Lei’s death thus realizes what Lao She had theorized: literature as an extreme experience, as immersion in the fire of history. In this gesture, character and author do not merge, but rather are conjoined in the act of destruction. Like Dante, Lao She does not claim to speak from the outside; only, in the case of Lao She, his entry into the inferno does not produce a perfect monumental construction, but rather a “spectacular” defeat (Wang, 1989, p. 212). It is precisely through this defeat that *Cremation* accomplishes the task the author had set himself: not to please, not to succeed, but to choose—even at the cost of annihilation.

It seems possible, therefore, that while in writing *Cat Country* Lao She consciously uses Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as a model of “literature of the soul” aimed at awakening the conscience of Chinese citizens in 1930s society, in *Cremation* the function of such literature is also oriented inward towards the soul of the author (You, 2025, p. 362).

The ethical implications of this inward turn become clearer in light of *Inferno* III and Dante’s treatment of the Pusillanimous souls. In the third

canto of the *Inferno*, after passing through the gates of the Inferno, Dante and Virgil enter the Vestibule, the first place in the Afterlife and the site of the Pusillanimous souls, those who never knew how to choose in life. These are not truly damned souls, but are nevertheless subject to a punishment based on the *contrapasso*: they eternally pursue a meaningless banner, as meaningless as their existence has been. Alongside the Pusillanimous souls are also the angels who remained neutral in Lucifer's rebellion. Virgil invites Dante not to dwell on these, a sign of the contempt reserved for those who, by refusing all responsibility, have avoided moral judgment:

And he to me: "This miserable state is borne
by the wretched souls of those who lived
without disgrace yet without praise.
"They intermingle with that wicked band
of angels, not rebellious and not faithful
to God, who *held themselves apart*.
'Loath to impair its beauty, Heaven casts them out,
and depth of Hell does not receive them
lest on their account the evil angels gloat.'
[...]
'They have no hope of death,
and their blind life is so abject
that they are envious of every other lot.
'The world does not permit report of them.
Mercy and justice hold them in contempt.
Let us not speak of them — look and pass by.'
And I, all eyes, made out *a whirling banner
that ran so fast it seemed as though
it never could find rest*.
[...]
that made their faces stream with *blood*,
which, mingled with their *tears*,
was gathered at their feet by loathsome worms
(Alighieri, 2000, Inf. III, vv. 34-69).

The *contrapasso* Dante seeks here is rigorously symmetrical, "much more subtle than that of previous descriptions of the Inferno": those who in life followed no banner are forced after death to chase a meaningless banner; those who have shed neither blood nor tears for any cause find their own blood and tears becoming nourishment for worms (Inglese, 2016, p. 80). Dante insists that they never truly lived and are not worthy of memory: they embody a guilt that precedes moral error, that of moral inertia.

It is from this perspective that *Cremation* can be read as a Dantean lesson internalized through a conscious gesture of opposition to Pusillanimity. Wang Juren, who attempts to “not choose” in order to save his property and family, paradoxically ends up losing the very thing he wanted to preserve: his house is burned as a signal to the resistance fighters to begin the uprising, exposing the illusion of neutrality. In contrast, Lao She exposes himself to risk of making a choice on the authorial level. Writing, for him, means accepting the production of a text “of blood and tears,” as he claims in *The Great Time and the Writer* (2008e, p. 111). This choice protects him from the error that the Pusillanimous souls have committed in life.

Writing thus becomes an act of self-exposure and self-condemnation. Writing a war novel, knowing that one possesses neither direct experience nor the adequate aesthetic means, is equivalent to consciously choosing a path of potential artistic self-destruction. However, this very act achieves, on the level of authorship, what Dante demands on the moral level: not to shy away from action, not to take refuge in neutrality. In *Cremation*, this Dantean lesson is not imitated, but rather absorbed to the point of transforming itself into a regulating principle of the very act of writing. The novel thus bears witness to an extreme form of “literature of the soul,” rather than merely being part of the ordinary propaganda of the time (as critics maintain): it does not judge the world, but records the moment in which the author agrees to put his own artistic integrity at risk in order not to be counted among those who, out of fear or prudence, have chosen not to choose.⁸

Viewed more broadly, the movement from *Cat Country* to *Cremation* suggests that Lao She’s engagement with Dante cannot be reduced to the adoption of a fixed literary model. What he draws from the *Divine Comedy* changes according to the historical and literary problem at hand: in *Cat Country*, Dante provides an allegorical framework for the diagnosis of social degeneration; in *Cremation*, this engagement is reworked into a reflection on moral choice, historical responsibility, and the act of writing itself. Lao She’s selective reading of Dante, shaped by the conditions of wartime China, thus offers a specific example of how an Italian literary work can assume new functions within modern Chinese literature in response to a different set of intellectual and ethical concerns.

⁸ Cf., for example Hsia, 1999, p. 188. Cf. also Prado-Fonts, 2014, p. 178; Chow, 2001, p. 287.

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Declaração de Autoria

Yuze You, declarada autora, confirma sua participação em todas as etapas de elaboração do trabalho: 1. Conceição do projeto, pesquisa bibliográfica, análise e interpretação dos dados; 2. Redação e revisão do manuscrito; 3. Aprovação da versão final do manuscrito para publicação; 4. Responsabilidade por todos os aspectos do trabalho e garantia pela exatidão e integridade de qualquer parte da obra.

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